Raymond Williams and the Structure of Feeling of Reality TV

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Introduction

There is some general truth to the narrative that cultural studies moved away from its fraught, yet productive, entanglement with Marxist critique in the 1980s, never again to seriously rekindle that engagement. The trajectory of the work of Raymond Williams, however, moves in the opposite direction to much of that field of inquiry of which Williams is often identified as a founder. I will argue, for instance, that on the question of *method*, the work of Raymond Williams is increasingly influenced by debates in Marxist cultural theory. More so, the question of method *itself*, and in particular the problematic of *mediation*, both become central concerns for Williams—fundamental theoretical occupations which he shared with the Western Marxists, such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin. The increasing centrality of the problematic of mediation, in its various guises—the dynamics of materialist critique, the relation between structure and agency, the question of determination, and even the movement of the dialectic—in Williams' later work, reflects a deepening engagement with traditional Marxist categories while never claiming a simple identity with Marxist critique.

The deepening engagement with traditional Marxist categories signals both a continuity and a rupture within the trajectory of Williams' analytical method over his career: for instance, the approach which Williams first calls "cultural materialism" evolves into an approach which in his later work he comes to refer to as the "sociology of culture." My goal in this chapter is to sketch the movement of the critical method which Williams calls the sociology of culture and why the question of mediation is a central dimension of it. However, rather than describe Williams' analytical approach in abstraction, I will attempt to *demonstrate* some of the dynamics of a sociology of culture approach through the articulation of the contemporary cultural phenomenon of Reality TV. While Williams did not live long enough to witness the explosion of Reality TV in the realm of popular commercial culture in the 1990s, it is safe to say that Williams would have considered Reality TV to be a significant and "serious" object of contemporary cultural analysis. For Williams, all cultural forms and practices, even those colloquially considered to be debased, commercial, banal or frivolous, are embedded in larger social processes and can thus potentially serve as indexes of those processes with equally as much "hermeneutic success" as more sober cultural forms (Williams 1981, 126).

Mediation and Method

For Williams, all developments in cultural form (including Reality TV) express, at the same time, developments in social practice more generally. Williams states, "they [cultural forms] have to be seen… in themselves [as] disguised social processes. Everything is then to be gained by their serious recognition as social processes; moreover as social processes of a highly significant and valuable kind" (ibid.). This is not to say that, for Williams, changes in cultural form are necessarily a *consequence* of broader social transformations. Williams is very careful to avoid articulations which suggest that change in cultural form necessarily *follows* the social, the technical, or the economic—formulations which would solicit charges of a mechanical or orthodox materialism. In *Marxism and Literature,* for instance, Williams explicitly retheorizes Marx's famous and highly contested base-superstructure metaphor in a way that challenges accusations of a mechanical and unidirectional causal movement *from* base *to* superstructure. Instead, Williams depicts a bidirectional causal movement between the cultural and the social that is more aptly described as dialectical. For instance, it is often the case, according to Williams, that "the formal [i.e., cultural] innovation is a true and integral element of the [social] changes themselves: an articulation, by technical discovery, of changes in consciousness which are themselves forms of consciousness of change" (Williams 1981, 142). Here, cultural innovation is formulated as the mediation of structure and agency, the mediation of acting with intent on the social world and the social world that informs all intentions and practice. Formal innovation is, here, the very material expression of social change. No one could mistake such a formulation for a "vulgar materialism."

In fact, if Williams were to be faulted, it would be for a formulation wherein the mutual constituency—the causal interrelatedness—of all dimensions of the social world itself becomes a perfunctory supposition, theoretical shorthand for glossing over the sometimes duller empirical contingencies of historical development.

And yet, when it comes to the question of method, this tense and sometimes fraught relationship between the empirical specificities of historical movement and the deeper systematicity of those specificities (a systematicity unavailable to the faculties of empirical observation and therefore accessible only through theoretical reconstruction) is precisely where Williams focuses his attention. The name given to the problematic posed by this "tense and sometimes fraught" relationship in Williams' work, and in Marxist cultural theory, more generally, is mediation. The concept of mediation has suffered from its association with the (arguably misattributed) "bad Hegelian" move of collapsing the chaotic diversity of the world into the repressive order of universal history (in large part, a consequence of Louis Althusser's polemic against "History" and the latter's coded allusion to Hegel). In Williams' work, however, the concept of mediation evades such a caricatured movement. For Williams, mediation is a method of *identifying a system of difference*; the aim of the method of mediation is precisely to avoid subsuming empirical particularities within the identity of their systematic interrelationship.

The particular dimensions of a cultural form will always exceed its systematic situation, *and yet*, its particularity can only be captured in analysis through its theoretical (i.e., systematic) representation. While Williams doesn't use the term, I argue that another way of describing this analytical movement could be "dialectical." For instance, Williams argues, "[the analysis of a cultural practice requires an] adequate theoretical account of the conditions of a practice, for it is in these conditions that a *specificity can be affirmed,* and yet the inevitable relations between different practices explored" (Williams 1981, 145: my emphasis). Here, "dialectical" is a suitable description of Williams' formulation wherein specificity can only be affirmed through the presentation of its formal systematicity and vice versa. Incidentally, in light of the conceptual divide that is colloquially posited between the thought of Williams and that of Althusser, Williams' emphasis on the necessary "theoretical account of the conditions of a practice" exhibits an unexpected kinship with Althusser's critique of "immediacy" and his insistence on the theoretical reconstruction of the object of analysis.[1]

For Williams, mediation is the theory of the "how" of the interrelation between a specific practice or cultural form and its historical conditions. Furthermore, the "narrative" of this interrelation will always be multiple given that it can unfurl from various analytical points of view: from the processes of composition in a specific medium, from the practical relations between social and cultural forms, and from the indirect relation between experience and its composition (Williams 1981, 24). In *The Sociology of Culture,* Williams enumerates the various ways in which we can theorize the "how" of the interrelation between the "particular" and its social context using the example of the particular cultural form of Kafka's novel, *The Trial*. What are the different ways in which it is possible to mediate the ultimate specificity of *The Trial*, a specificity that exceeds all systemic identity, by its (equally necessary) conditions of possibility? How does *The Trial* instruct readers about its specific time and place—the raw material of its expression—while doing so through the lesson of what was, at the same time, *impossible* to say or apprehend in a direct (or, "nonallegorical") way:

> Kafka's novel *The Trial*, for example, can be read from different positions, as (a) *mediation by projection*—an arbitrary and irrational social system is not directly described, in its own terms, but projected in its essentials, as strange and alien; or (b) *mediation by the discovery of an "objective correlative"*—a situation and characters are composed to produce, in an objective form, the subjective or actual feelings—an inexpressible guilt—from which the original impulse to composition came; or (c) *mediation as a function of the fundamental social process of consciousness*, in which certain crises which cannot otherwise be directly apprehended are "crystallized" in certain direct images and forms of art—images which then illuminate a basic (social and psychological) condition: not just Kafka's but a general alienation. In (c) this "basic condition" can be variably referred to the nature of a whole epoch, of a particular society at a particular period, or of a particular group within that society at that period. (ibid.)

[1] One of the consequences of the so-called "debate" between E. P. Thompson and Louis Althusser was to cement an oversimplified analytical opposition between the humanist orientations of the British New Left and the structuralist orientations of continental Leftist theory. Proper names, such as Williams and Althusser, are often, intentionally or unintentionally, invoked as coded allusions to these "oppositional" orientations in Leftist social thought after the Stalinist revelations of 1956 and in light of the rethinking of Marxism that subsequently commenced.

Position "c," or "mediation as a function of the fundamental social process of consciousness," speaks to Williams' formulation above regarding the indirect relation between experience and its composition. Such a formulation refutes the standard critique of Williams (of Williams' "culture and society" analysis specifically, or of the work of the British New Left, more generally) as operating with a self-adequate or simple (i.e., positive) category of experience. For Williams, experience is always mediated by what he calls the social process; experience can therefore only ever be an *indirect* expression of the social. On the other hand, neither does Williams dismiss the concept of intention. Experience may ultimately be a negative category in the sense of being informed by forces that lie beyond its capacity for self-reflectivity however, for Williams, this does not mean that human agents in the world are haplessly ventriloquated by ideologies that set them in motion to serve the interests of a machine that subverts their own. Human agents act on the world with intention and this intention also informs, in specific ways, the dimensions of the action taken and the impact it will have.

Williams' painstaking, provisional and circumstantial negotiation between the "centring" forces of the historical subject—experience, intention—and the "decentring" forces of the social process reverberates with the debates within the British New Left concerning the place and merit of the structuralist current emanating from the Continent (represented by thinkers such as Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, and Poulantzas). Williams walks a fine line through the issue of determination—a catch-all term for the problematic which animates these debates; for Williams, history is indeed a process, but it is a process *with* a subject which can never be controlled, in the last instance:

> Determination is a real social process, but never (as in some theological and some Marxist versions) a wholly controlling, wholly predicting set of causes. On the contrary, the reality of determination is the setting of limits and the exertion of pressures, within which variable social practices are profoundly affected but never necessarily controlled. We have to think of determination not as a single force, or a single abstraction of forces, but as a process in which real determining factors—the distribution of power or of capital, social and political inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups—set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome of complex activity within or at these limits, and under or against these pressures.
> (Williams 2003, 133)

Williams' concept of a "structure of feeling" addresses precisely the precarious balance between the forces of structure and agency, between the forces of the social process and the willing, intending, experiencing subject. "Structure of feeling" expresses the contradiction that our personal, intimate, individual experiences (feelings) are always, at the same time, informed by collective and historical prejudices, expectations, fears, desires, conventions, institutions, laws, and modalities of the social that transgress even the most extended view of the feeling subject. Structure of feeling connotes the sense that the feelings that belong to us, that animate us as individuals, at the same time, exceed us, extend far beyond the individual, diachronically and synchronically. The concept of a structure of feeling, therefore, for Williams, is an effort to capture the complex mediations between the particular and the general that animate any specific historical conjuncture. When it comes to the investigation of a particular cultural form, then (Reality TV, for instance), we could ask what is the "structure of feeling"—the complex system of mediations—that animates the historical conjuncture which offers up Reality TV as one of its cultural forms?

Mediating Reality TV

Turning to the analysis of a particular cultural form, there are numerous vantage points from which to unfurl the narrative of its historical significance. According to Williams, one must be attentive to the specific dimensions of the actual cultural form itself, the cultural institutions and formations in which the cultural form is embedded, the means of the cultural production process and the social relations of the cultural production process and, finally, the historical and systemic interrelationships of each of the above (Williams 1981, 14). In the case of the phenomenon of Reality TV, one finds that a story can be told from each one of these vantage points. In the following analysis, I will move back and forth between Reality TV's institutional and political economic situation and the particularities of the cultural form itself in an attempt to reveal, in the spirit of Williams' approach, the ways in which Reality TV is embedded in wider economic processes, expresses dominant and concurrent structures of feeling, and why the emergence of Reality TV is integral to a more general history of the institutional organization of television and the social relations of television production.

Williams would instruct a contemporary theorist to be attentive to the immediate questions which the object itself seems to solicit (while moving beyond the immediately apparent answers): Why has Reality TV been such a tremendously prolific genre of programming?; How do we account for its enormous popularity, commercial success, unanticipated longevity, and virus-like reproductive capacity?; What social, economic, and cultural dynamics, developments and processes does Reality TV express?; What collective desire (structure of feeling) is articulated (and deferred)?; What is the promise of Reality TV and does it deliver?

On the level of its immediate institutional conditions, the cultural form that came to be called Reality TV in the early 1990s reflects those political, economic and industrial transformations that characterize advanced consumer economies after the 1970s. These transformations in the mode of production—referred to by such terms as, post-industrialism, post-Fordism, flexible accumulation, neoliberalism or postmodern capitalism, depending on the vantage point of the analysis—generally speaking, share a common orientation: increasing the profitability of private industrial and commercial enterprise. This goal was, and continues to be, achieved largely through (differing variations of) two principle and related strategies. The first strategy is to decrease worker control over labour conditions. Often referred to as the flexibilization of labour, this strategy involves lowering average wages in relation to the cost of living, increasing part-time and contract labour, union breaking, and offering workers credit in lieu of shrinking wages. The second strategy is the rationalizing of production costs through outsourcing, moving production, buying competing firms, using cheaper raw material, expanding markets, creating economies of scale, and so on.[2] The instrumentalizing of both strategies has been facilitated by the introduction of various laws, policies and regulations that underwrite the interests of industry.

Reality TV is an index of this industrial era of flexibilization in several ways. It is no coincidence that some of the earliest examples of the Reality genre emerge in the context of a Hollywood writers' strike at the end of the 1980s. Not requiring the elaborate and labour-intensive scripts of comedies and dramas, early Reality TV was quite literally a means of union busting in the context of the writers' strike. Further, the formal qualities of Reality TV represent an effective means of rationalizing production costs; eliminating the expensive labour of actors and writers, relatively speaking, Reality TV is an extremely cheap media product to produce. Reality TV participants are attracted by the chance to achieve celebrity (their fifteen minutes of fame), entry into a certain profession (cooking, singing, fashion design, interior design, dancing, modeling, business management, and so on), a free makeover (of home, hair, body, car, or wardrobe), free therapy and lifestyle counseling (on marriage, sex, dating, raising children, workplace relationships, or in-laws) and, in some cases, a cash prize for the last-standing "survivor" of the experience.

The rewards which are offered to *some* Reality TV participants (namely, the winners) distract from the fact that, unlike actors, *none* of the participants are paid for their involvement; none are formally reimbursed—never mind unionized or given benefits—for their labour in producing a product which is highly successful at exploiting markets globally and creating vast economies of scale and profits for producers. In the context of advanced consumer economies, the ability to expand one's franchise globally becomes, more generally, a requirement for competitiveness. Reality TV formats are especially advantageous with respect to their exporting and importing; in other words, Reality TV "travels" very well. Reality formats can be easily emptied of their cultural content and filled with local and regional references. As Mark Andrejevic argues, Reality TV has developed as a "customizable transnational format" (Andrejevic 2004, 12).

Meanwhile, in order to fully historicize Reality TV we must also explore its more complex and indirect mediations that involves introducing a theoretical and more "speculative" analytical approach. Like empirical approaches, however, we begin with what we can immediately observe. Here, I will focus on two easily recognizable dynamics of the Reality TV phenomenon, in general. The first dynamic is the way in which Reality TV participates in a wider popular compulsion to public disclosure. Reality TV both reflects and aids in facilitating a collective and yet individually expressed drive to make oneself publicly visible, to make oneself seen and heard by an audience of spectators, to have one's fifteen minutes of fame, to simulate the public visibility of celebrity. This same dynamic also takes the form of a generalized lack of resistance to (or internalized rationalization of, and even an enthusiastic embrace of) comprehensive surveillance.

[2] There is actually a third fundamental strategy for increasing the profitability of enterprise that is the financializing of the production process. While a central and, arguably, dominant dimension of the current mode of production in advanced consumer economies, financialization is, for now, outside the purview of the discussion.

Again, Reality TV expresses and participates in a wider social modality wherein people in advanced consumer societies readily submit to, and in some cases invite, pervasive surveillance, monitoring, and voyeurism. From a generalized relative ease with the ubiquity of surveillance cameras to the electronic collection of consumer data, to the commodification of our name, address, and email, to the popularity of social networking sites, to the online broadcasting of bedroom cams and diary cams, this contemporary popular compulsion to make oneself visible is met half-way by Reality TV's invitation to participants to expose themselves—physically, emotionally, psychologically—to reveal their "inner selves" and most deeply personal stories, to disclose occasions of trauma, violence, physical harm or abuse, addiction, betrayal, and suicide or, in some cases, to make themselves the spectacle of humiliating scenarios. Whether on talk shows such as "Oprah," "Dr. Phil," or "Jerry Springer," or competition-oriented programs such as "Survivor," "Last Comic Standing," or "America's Next Top Model," the act of self-revelation is made more seductive—and the "invitation" to do so more aggressive—through the portrayal of self-disclosure as an outlet for creative and *authentic* self-expression, as an opportunity for personal growth, as "character building" and, as in the words of both Oprah and Dr. Phil, a chance for participants to "get real." The second dynamic of the Reality TV phenomenon on which I will focus in this analysis is the way in which Reality TV both participates in, and is circumscribed by, a wider social discourse concerning the value of democratic participation and interactivity.

According to producers as well as many contestants and audience members, what makes Reality TV a valuable and historically unique media experiment is the fact that Reality TV invites and even celebrates the participation of "ordinary people" in the programming, and that it further invites audience members to interact with program procedures and participants through online commentary or to even "determine" the outcome of the show through voting. This interactive and participatory quality, so the story goes, makes Reality TV a potentially authentic and "democratic" media form and, hence, different from traditional television programming. Whereas traditional television programming is produced according to an exclusive and hierarchical production process, Reality TV introduces the involvement of "ordinary people" in the production of television content. Audiences can now actively participate in a medium that has conventionally relegated them to the role of passive spectators. According to producers and much popular commentary, Reality TV promises to close the distance between the two sides of the television screen. While this reading of the democratizing potential of Reality TV is sometimes challenged in popular commentary and sentiment, it remains a dominant part of popular perception regarding the role and character of the Reality TV cultural form.

The Promise of Access

So how can one situate these two principle characteristics of Reality TV with respect to wider social and historical processes? How are these developments in cultural form represented by Reality TV and animated by particular collective sentiments mediated by the wider social formation? At least in part, the popular expectation of participatory and interactive media is a function of the ascendance of digital communication technologies such as the Internet and the World Wide Web. The introduction of the technological possibility for greater interactivity in the delivery of commercial entertainment and information transforms existing cultural modalities, expectations, and "standards" for other traditional media. In this respect, it is not a coincidence that Reality TV and digital forms of communication become dominant cultural forms concurrently. Here we have an example of the way in which the emergence of new technological capabilities transforms the cultural expectations surrounding "old" media. However, the movement of determination flows in the opposite direction as well: the popular critique and perceived shortcomings of old media prepare the ground for the popular reception, use, and institutionalization of new media. In the case of the traditional medium of television the popular critique circumscribing its production was what Williams refers to as the "problem of access" (Williams 1981, 91).

The problem of access concerns both the means and social relations of cultural production, generally, but is more pronounced in the case of mediated forms of culture and communication. With the emergence of any new form of communication or culture, according to Williams, it is initially characterized by a relatively open, non-specialized and diverse set of practices. As the cultural form or mode of communication develops, and especially in the case of a mediated form of culture or communication (the medium of television, for example), the practices which constitute it become more specialized and the distance between "producer" and "consumer" becomes increasingly wide. This is so even in cases where the production process may be publicly as opposed to privately owned: "as a culture becomes richer and more complex, involving many more artistic techniques developed to a high degree of specialization, the social distance of many practices becomes much greater, and there is a virtually inevitable if always complex set of divisions between participants and spectators in the various arts" (ibid.).

When we do introduce the dynamics of ownership and management into the development history of the medium of television, Williams points out how in the case of the privatized production process, the transition from single capitalist owner or family to corporate to a conglomerate structure introduces new layers of professional management to the production process, creating "significantly greater distance from immediate producers" and particularly so in the case of technically complex production (ibid., 117). As this model of corporate and/or conglomerate private ownership becomes dominant in the sphere of television production, as it did in the U.S. and increasingly so in the rest of the global north, its characteristic social relations become determining and divisive (ibid., 91). The conglomerate structure of ownership, for example, entails that ownership and control of television production becomes just one sector of a wider ownership structure of a (non-specifically cultural) productive and financial arena. In this context, the production of television has less and less to do with television as a cultural form, *per se:* "[conglomerate institutional organization] is at once dominant in modern cultural production and yet, in its determining forms, radically separate from it; its 'purpose' now primarily elsewhere" (ibid., 117). Historically, television production both helps to determine and is determined by the fundamental contradiction of modern capitalism: "increasingly socialized forms of production [and especially in highly technical production] are defined and limited by private… forms of ownership and control" (ibid.).

This history of the increasingly restricted access to the production of television—which is to say, the history of the increasingly undemocratic social relations of television production—expresses itself as a generalized alienation of television audiences, the collective expression of what Williams refers to as the problem of access. This generalized alienation is the ground against which we must figure the introduction of digital technologies and the enhanced capacity for more democratic participation and audience interaction that these technologies represent.[3] This is not to argue, of course, that digital forms of communication and culture have been unanimously successful (or successful at all) at actually delivering on this promise. However, this historical context goes some distance in explaining why the promise itself—its rhetorical value and currency—implanted so readily in the cultural ground and collective sensibility.

The Work of Being Watched

However, the moment we identify where the force of human intention (collective or individual) is at play in the social narrative—here, the willful formation of the desire for, and the seeking out of, democratically enhanced modes of cultural production and access to new modalities of self-expression—according to Williams' sociology of culture method,[4] the analysis cannot rest there. Instead, we must resituate that instance of willful human agency with respect to the attendant forces of social structure that overdetermine it.[5] The popular desire for public visibility, self-expression, access to cultural production processes, participatory and interactive modes of communication and culture, and all those concomitant cultural practices animated by this desire (of which the phenomenon of Reality TV is one of the most iconic) are, at the same time, expressions of an economic and political "structure"—i.e., a certain stage of the social mode of production, namely "advanced consumer society"—which *requires* that its agents voluntarily submit themselves to comprehensive surveillance in order to facilitate the mass customization of consumer products. In this analytical narrative, critical focus is diverted from the particularity of the Reality TV form, to its identity with the general movement of consumer society. Here, the significance of Reality TV is not what may be unique about it, but the manner in which its cultural reverberations are overdetermined by the social imperatives of a certain historical development of mass production.

In his book, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Mark Andrejevic describes the ideological significance of visibility and interactivity as collectively internalized values in the era of mass customized production.

[3] The general adoption of television in the 1950s, like that of digital media which would follow 30 years later, was circumscribed by the promise that it would "democratize" culture. In the case of television, however, the promise of democratizing culture referred to bringing once elite or exclusive cultural forms and events (plays, concerts, operas, political speeches, inaugurations) to a wider and more diverse audience. It also referred to a certain "leveling" of culture that would take place when these elite cultural forms were broadcast alongside popular forms (sporting events, game shows, situation-comedies, variety shows and children's programming). This earlier promise of democratization did not refer to a wider participation in the production of content, as does the promise of Reality TV. Neither TV, then, nor Reality TV, now, promises to democratize the social relations of TV production which, as Williams has argued, would be necessary to precipitate any profound change in the industry.

[4] And this particular movement of Williams' method is another example of its *dialectical* character.

[5] "Overdetermination" is an Althusserian term to which Williams, I believe, would not object.

In what he calls the "interactive, mass-customized economy," consumers voluntarily submit to comprehensive surveillance of "the rhythms of their everyday lives" whereupon goods and services are fashioned to fit the specific contours of consumers' needs and desires as perceived by manufactures and marketers. Mass customization, made possible by digital interactivity and a mass of consumers willing to live their lives online and on camera, promises to overcome the alienation, massification and homogenization of mass industrial society through the ostensible democratization of the production process through the "input" (monitoring) of consumers (Andrejevic 2004, 54). Allegorically, Reality TV promises to overcome the alienation of mass media entertainment through the participation of ordinary people in the production of media content and the interactivity of the audience:

> Mass customization emerges as an effective marketing strategy in an era of increasing economic stratification even as it promises increased democratization. The deployment of the offer of shared control becomes more ideologically important at a time when real control over economic resources is becoming increasingly concentrated. At the same time, increasing stratification requires more comprehensive forms of marketplace monitoring in order to rationalize the production and marketing processes for an ever wider range of goods for a more segmented market. The offer of participation both compensates (symbolically) for growing inequality and serves as an inducement to submit to the forms of interactive monitoring relied on by producers to reduce uncertainty in an increasingly diversified market.
> Highlighting this conjunction is the… resurgence in the "democratic" genre of Reality TV.
> (ibid., 67-8)

Andrejevic's most salient point is that in the era he calls "the death of privacy," cultural practices of interactivity and visibility, and the submission to comprehensive monitoring are *productive,* and like commercial industrial production, produce surplus value that is appropriated privately: "interactivity functions increasingly as a form of productive surveillance allowing for the commodification of the products generated by what I describe as the work of being watched. … [R]eality TV anticipates the exploitation of… the work of being watched, a form of production wherein consumers are invited to sell access to their personal lives… [We] create value for advertisers and marketers by allowing ourselves to be watched" (ibid., 2, 6, 8). The reproduction of an economy of mass customization requires the generalized internalization of the value of self-disclosure towards which Reality TV functions as a form of civic pedagogy.

Voyeurism TV is, therefore, mediated by its increasingly important economic role in the emerging interactive economy. Andrejevic's analysis extends the thesis of Dallas Smythe according to the transformations in the mode of production that have transpired since the time of Smythe's formulation. In *Dependency Road*, Smythe articulates the now canonical (within the field of the political economy of media) thesis that watching television is a form of productive labour where the value produced is appropriated by media industries that sell (for a profit) the "audience commodity" to advertisers. Andrejevic extends Smythe's analysis to demonstrate the way in which, today, *being watched* is also productive labour, illustrating the contemporary collapse, as did Smythe, of the sites of production and domestic space, work and leisure.

For Williams, this analysis of Reality TV's continuity (its identity or "sameness," in other words) with the more general development of commodity production and surplus extraction is both accurate and partial. A holistic, historical analysis of Reality TV could not rest on the question of its general identity with the dominant movement of the mode of production. Nonetheless, its general identity is the requisite ground for the definition of its particularity.

First as Tragedy, then as Farce

In Marx's *The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* in which he analyzes the mediation of history and political struggles, when referring to the 1851 machinations of Louis Bonaparte (Napoleon's nephew), he opens the work by saying: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." If we follow Raymond Williams' narrative of the historical development of the dramatic mode since the second part of the nineteenth century, it is possible to make the surprising argument that Reality TV is the farcical reiteration of the naturalist revolution in drama. Placing Reality TV on an historical continuum with the work of Chekov and Ibsen appears to be a farcical proposition in itself.

Nonetheless, Williams argues that television is the ultimate realization of the original naturalist convention of the enclosed room drama. I will extend Williams' thesis to argue that Reality TV, in particular, more so than in the case of television more generally, can be seen as the inheritor of the naturalist dramatic convention. By rearticulating Williams' narrative, and in so doing identifying another vantage point from which to map the mediations of Reality TV, we introduce, once again, the force of human agency into the analysis of the developmental movement of cultural forms.

According to Williams, since the 1880s, dramatic conventions have been dominated by the theatrical form referred to as the "drama of the enclosed room," or the "enclosed-stage-as-room theatre" (Williams 2003, 51). The naturalist convention in drama reduced the narrative scale of historical and tragic drama—the stories of kings and religious leaders, of the victories and defeats of historical heroes and villains, of the battles of church and state, and so on—to "interior" stories: interpersonal or interfamilial conflict, romantic betrayal and courtship, psychological drama, existential crisis, living room wars and salon politics, the "victories and defeats" of ordinary people and everyday life. The naturalist convention in drama reflected the rise of the bourgeoisie and of civil society as the arena of the "private citizen." This is era of the emergence of the mutually defining dichotomy of the public and private spheres, again, each predicated on the newly created private citizen. Theatrical forms expressed this newly generated interest in the private world of the family, the romantic relation or the friendship—where a few characters live out their private experience of an unseen public world (ibid., 52).

Williams argues that not only did television inherit the stylistic and thematic conventions of the enclosed room drama, television was able to *realize* the original naturalist convention in a way that the theatre stage could only anticipate and approximate. However, those stylistic and thematic conventions of television—namely, the portrayal of interior stories—which were attributed by media historians to the technical possibilities, first, of cinema and, subsequently, of television (the close-up shot, the magnification of facial expression, the amplification of quiet sounds and whispers, jump shots back and forth between characters emphasizing dramatic interaction, etc.), Williams demonstrates to have been constituent of a structure of feeling that *predates* both film and television and must be explained with respect to historical development of the dramatic mode:

> Since a major structure of feeling, in the art of the period, was in any case of this kind [i.e., the enclosed-room drama], it is not surprising that many TV plays reproduced this assumption of the nature of representative reality. This was a drama of the box in the same fundamental sense as the naturalist drama had been the drama of the framed stage. The technical possibilities that were commonly used corresponded to this structure of feeling: the enclosed internal atmosphere; the local interpersonal conflict; the close-up on a private feeling. Indeed these emphases could be seen as internal properties of the medium itself, when in fact they were a selection of some of its properties according to the dominant structure of feeling.
> (ibid.)

If television represents the technological realization of an already dominant structure of feeling, Reality TV hoists the realization of that structure of feeling onto a whole new level: instead of promising a "real-life" portrayal of the private feelings and conflicts of everyday life (as does traditional TV drama) Reality TV promises to capture emotional and interpersonal worlds of "real-life" itself. Speaking of the mid 1950s, the period in which television becomes a majority cultural form in the West, Williams says, "In substance and in method [television offered] the exploring 'eye of the camera,' the feel for everyday ordinary life, the newly respected rhythms of the speech of work and the streets and of authentic privacy (what was later described ominously… as 'dialogue as if wire-tapped')" (ibid., 54). Williams could not have realized just *how* ominous, and prescient, this observation was to be. Reality TV showcases dialogue, *literally*, wire-tapped. Further, Reality TV is the public exhibition, *par excellence*, of the private anxieties and emotional pathologies of contemporary consumer society: a fearful equation of invisibility and valuelessness, anxiety surrounding the prospects for social mobility, the internalization of interpersonal competition and the dissolution of organic forms of cooperation, personal "success" as an unpredictable function of lottery-like fortune over the culmination of hard work and perseverance, a narcissistic compulsion to fulfill the mandate of self-disclosure, or the alienation of defining oneself with respect to commodified fashions and gestures of "authenticity."

A Neoliberal Theatre of Suffering

For the final twist of this analysis (which is by no means to say that we have exhausted the possible social mediations of the cultural form of Reality TV) I want to situate the structure of feeling described by Williams above as the private and "interior" stories of the enclosed-room drama with respect to the political and economic imperatives of the social formation referred to more generally as neoliberalism. In her article, "Reality TV: A Neoliberal Theatre of Suffering," Anna McCarthy illustrates Williams' claim that "manifest commercial modes of control and selection become, in effect, cultural modes" (Williams 1981, 104) when she argues that Reality TV is an "important arena in which to observe the vernacular diffusion of neoliberal common sense" (McCarthy 2007, 17). In this analysis, "neoliberal common sense" is itself one of the structures of feeling that animates Reality TV in the present historical conjuncture.

The vernacular diffusion of neoliberal common sense takes place through a mode of ideological production (or, "technology of the self," for those who prefer Foucault's conceptual apparatus to that of Marx) which McCarthy calls "responsibilization" (ibid, 18). The modality of neoliberalism, the hegemonic social formation in advanced consumer societies in the global north since the 1980s, involves the privatizing and individualizing of social, economic and political forms of life, effectively shrinking the purview of the state and those public institutions whose purpose was to serve the interests of a collectivity or to protect common resources. Elevating the ideal of the self-governing individual over the caretaker state, the "common sense" of neoliberalism requires that subjects naturalize the practices and idea of being fully responsible for, and only obligated to, the self. Responsibilization refers to this process of the subject's internalizing of the injunctions of the neoliberal formation.

For McCarthy, Reality TV is one such technology of the self, instructing audiences and participants that social responsibility is *individual* responsibility, supporting "privatizing forms of governance and civic life" (ibid.). Reality TV's foregrounding of psychological warfare between contestants reflects the neoliberal process of "shrinking [the] public sphere… based [increasingly] in psychologized models of public culture which draw their warrants from intimate experiences and affective performances of the self" (ibid.). The traumatized individual pays a central role in the theatre of Reality TV. Concocting scenarios of betrayal, humiliation, fear or revulsion, ostracism, group marginalization and condemnation, or the public revelation of personal defects and "unacceptable" physical characteristics, Reality TV "produces scene after scene of painful civic pedagogy" (ibid., 19). Such instruction in negotiating painful and precarious survival techniques, demonstrates, according to McCarthy, "the ways trauma works in the service of self-governing, as part of neoliberalism's outsourcing of state functions into the private realm," (ibid., 31) where competition (rather than cooperation), the lottery gamble (rather than commitment), or the "makeover (rather than state assistance) is the key to social mobility and civic empowerment" (ibid., 17).

Conclusion

With respect to the relationship between cultural forms and wider social processes, Williams' sociology of culture requires that we not rest too comfortably, with too much certainty, on the determining force of either social structure or intentional human agency. Williams' approach would have us negotiate the possibility that the visibility imperative which circumscribes the Reality TV form functions simultaneously as an expression of economic and political processes, as a mechanism of social control, and as a calculated response of individuals to a popular anxiety, on the one hand, and to a desire for greater interactive (democratic) community, on the other, in the context of the objective forces of standardization and rationalization that contain expressions of self and individuality in consumer capitalism. Williams would have us be attentive to the way in which Reality TV both responds to and informs contemporary structures of feeling. For example, if the cultural production of Reality TV is shaped by a process of globalizing markets and the flexibilizing of labour relations, it also rewrites the narrative of "the American dream" (i.e., the myth of social advancement through hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance in the context of legally equalized opportunity) to reflect the dynamics of competition and social lottery.

However contrived and highly manipulated are the scenarios of Reality TV, they also represent the greater "realism" of social interaction in late modern consumer societies where the standardizing logic of the industrial process organizes the social world even on the private level of personalities and emotion and through the most "personal" and spontaneous of human encounters. And, yet, in the restless spirit of Williams' sociology of culture, we can never discount a dimension of experience that will always *exceed* history as the present force of the past, of sedimented or canalized practices.

This irreducible excess—what is in motion, active, alive, here and now—is always in play. Attempts to articulate its essence have grasped for terms such as, "temporal presence," "realization of the instant," "specificity of present being," and the "inalienably physical" (Williams 1977, 128). However, for Williams, the concept of that object to which we refer simply as "the social" should already encompass this sense of the excess or "outside" of history as much as it encompasses the objective force of the formal, the sedimented or the institutional. In fact, in Williams' dense and expansive concept of the social, even this latter sense of the "objective" and formalized is rendered dynamic in his presentation of it. While the social—as history, as formalized practice—may impose itself on the present, it is an analytical mistake, according to Williams, to represent the social as that which is fixed or finalized, and not, rather, as that which is itself in constant reform and revision. For Williams, history and the social are continuously "in process"; the present acts on the past as much as the past informs the active present. This "impossibly" precarious analytical balance is expressed in the chapter called "Structures of Feeling" in *Marxism and Literature*:

> In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in a habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products. … [This vision of experience as finished product] is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes.
> (ibid.)

A structure of feeling is therefore simply a term for the social itself, a concept in Williams that is anything but simple. It may be more appropriate to speak of the social, for Williams, as a problematic rather than as a concept: it enunciates the problem of capturing an object that is constantly in motion, in process, and yet exerts the force of an objective totality. In an attempt to capture such an object, Williams' sociology of culture shares the totalizing movement of Marxian dialectical analysis, the restlessness and historical sensitivity of Adorno's negative dialectics, the attention to alterity of Derrida's deconstructive cultural readings, and yet demonstrates an empathy for the "volk" that reverberates with a Romantic sensibility. Williams' kind of analytical nuance may be out of step with the present inclinations of radical cultural theory and, perhaps, understandably so. One could argue that these are times urgently requiring the kind of vulgar or declarative statements that Williams' sociology of culture does not condone. Nonetheless, as method, Williams' sociology of culture stands as a test, as the kind of ground against which our more declarative statements on the culture of advanced capitalism will be measured.

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